

New observations of Anambra Waxbill *Estrilda poliopareia*

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Nouvelles observations de l'Astrild du Niger *Estrilda poliopareia*. L'Astrild du Niger *Estrilda poliopareia* est une espèce endémique au delta du Niger, au Nigéria, classée comme Vulnérable. Préalablement aux observations des auteurs présentées ici, il n'existait que peu de mentions documentées, la dernière datant apparemment de janvier 1987. De mars 2001 à avril 2002, les auteurs ont observé l'espèce neuf fois, en saison sèche et en saison des pluies, en 12 localités du delta (Tableau 1). Les astrilds ne se trouvaient jamais au delà d'un kilomètre d'une rivière, malgré la présence d'habitat qui semblait favorable plus à l'intérieur. Ils étaient en groupes monospécifiques ou mixtes (comprenant des Astrilds à joues oranges *E. melpoda*) comptant jusqu'à 50 individus, en couples ou solitaires. L'espèce se nourrissait de graines de plantes de milieux plus ou moins perturbés et semblait tolérer la présence humaine. Les auteurs estiment que la population compte au moins 500 individus. Pour évaluer l'impact des activités humaines sur cette population, des données supplémentaires sur sa biologie sont indispensables.

Anambra Waxbill *Estrilda poliopareia* is a very local and little-known Nigerian endemic that is classified as Vulnerable, with a population estimated at just 250–1,000 birds (BirdLife International 2000, Fig. 1). Although sometimes considered a subspecies of Fawn-breasted Waxbill *E. paludicola* (Dowsett & Dowsett-Lemaire 1993),

it is more frequently treated as a distinct species (White 1963, Elgood *et al.* 1994, Clement *et al.* 1993, Fry & Keith 2004).

Prior to the sightings reported here, few documented records were known, the most recent apparently dating from January 1987, when two were identified at Asaba, near Onitsha (Ash 1990).



Figure 1. General distribution of Anambra Waxbill *Estrilda poliopareia* in the Niger Delta and range in Nigeria. Répartition générale de l'Astrild du Niger *Estrilda poliopareia* dans le delta du Niger et aire de distribution au Nigéria

In March 1999, during the Niger Delta Environmental Survey, the species was searched for in vain by one of us along the sandbanks of the Niger River at Asaba (Roux 1999).

Observations

In the period March 2001–April 2002 we observed Anambra Waxbill on nine dates in both the dry and rainy seasons, at 12 different localities in the Niger Delta (Table 1). We first saw it on 1 March 2001, when we noted four individuals along the River Nun at Agadama, north of Yenagoa (and c.135 km south of the 1987 record at Asaba). All sites listed in Table 1 are situated along the Nun River, in the eastern part of the Niger Delta, except for one at the Dodo River estuary (Fig. 2).

Field identification

The following features were noted:

- small estrildid, similar in size and shape to Orange-cheeked Waxbill *E. melpoda*, but slightly more heavily built;
- bright red bill (but variable, somewhat less bright in some);
- no red spot on lores;
- bright red rump;
- brown tail;
- pale buffish breast, with a faint white throat.

The absence of a red loreal spot excludes female Red-billed Firefinch *Lagonosticta senegala*, the only possible confusion species in the area. Other observers (e.g. L. D. C. Fishpool) have sub-

sequently pointed out that the species has a pale eye.

Habitat and behaviour

The species was never encountered more than 1 km from riverbanks (and often less than 500 m away), despite the occurrence of some apparently favourable habitat further inland. It was seen feeding on the small seeds of *Kyllinga*, *Fimbristylis*, *Cerastium* (on almost bare sandbanks), *Digitaria* and *Panicum*. During our systematic search for the species in April 2002, its presence appeared to be highly correlated with the presence of these seed-bearing herbaceous plants. This explains the frequent occurrence of the birds on sandbanks in the middle of the Nun River. Weeds in yam plantations were also exploited, sometimes by large groups (of up to 30 in Agudama). According to our observations, elephant grass *Pennisetum* sp. was used for foraging only during flood periods (October–November): at this time of the year, the spikes of this very tall species (up to 3 m high) are fully developed and well above the water, while the sandbanks are covered. In Tombia, most of our observations in October–November were made in this vegetation, with birds taking young seeds and flowers.

Pennisetum may also be important as a cover under which the nest is built. We observed a bird carrying grass stems within a dense stand of *Pennisetum*, close to habitation. *Pennisetum* also provides shelter, as does cassava plantations, in

Table 1. Observations of Anambra Waxbill *Estrilda poliopareia* by the authors in 2001–2002.

Tableau 1. Observations de l'Astrild du Niger *Estrilda poliopareia* par les auteurs en 2001–2002.

Date	Locality / Localité	Coordinates / Coordonnées	Number of birds / Nombre d'oiseaux
1 March 2001	Agudama		30
8 March 2001	Dodo River estuary	04°54'N 05°27'E	19
28 October 2001	Tombia	04°59'N 06°15'E	2
30 October 2001	Agudama		3+2+4+2
31 October 2001	Akaibiri (south of Tombia)		3
1 November 2001	Polaku		6+2
29 April 2002	Tombia	04°59'N 06°15'E	12+3+10
	Sabagreia		1
30 April 2002	Okopuma	05°04'N 06°16'E	1+4
	Kaiama	05°06'N 06°18'E	2+3+1+2
	Ayakoroama		1
	Between Sabagreia and Okopuma	05°04'N 06°14'E	8+1+2+1
1 May 2002	Yenagoa	04°55'N 06°16'E	10

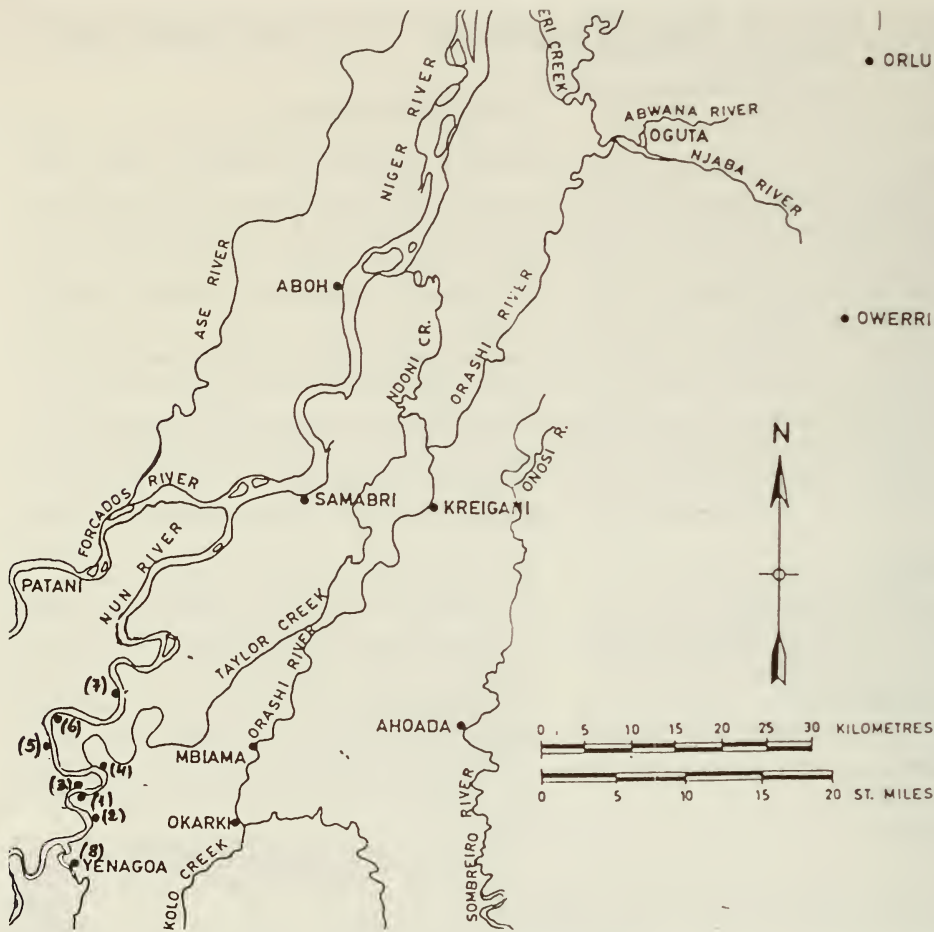


Figure 2. Observations of Anambra Waxbill *Estrilda poliopareia* along the Nun River mentioned in the text: 1: Tombia (Ekpetiama); 2: Akaibiri; 3: Agudama; 4: Polaku; 5: Sabagreia; 6: Okopuma; 7: Kaiama. Observations de l'Astrild du Niger *Estrilda poliopareia* le long de la rivière Nun mentionnées dans le texte.

which single birds were observed on several occasions.

Approximately 50% of encounters, including those of large groups, were made close to human presence or activity: industrial fallow in Tombia, house-yards in villages along the Nun River, hospital grounds in Yenagoa, and along tarred and untarred roads in Kaiama.

The waxbills were often observed in monospecific or mixed groups (including Orange-cheeked Waxbills) of up to 50 individuals, in pairs or singly. When alone, they were easy to approach, but large groups rapidly took flight. Flights were rarely over a long distance, although some were seen crossing the Nun River, which is several hundred metres wide at this point. Although it has

been suggested that the species is likely to make short-distance movements following flooding in severe rainy seasons (BirdLife International 2000), our observations in Tombia, made at the end of October, during the peak of flooding, appear to contradict this.

We saw birds carrying nesting material on 30 April 2002, but no nest was located. A female collected in June by Serle (1957) was coming into breeding condition.

Discussion

Between 29 April 2002 and 1 May 2002, we recorded 50 Anambra Waxbills (Table 1). Most of the localities visited during these three days are sufficiently distant from each other to exclude



Figures 3–4. Anambra Waxbill / Astrild du Niger *Estrilda polioptera*, Niger Delta, Nigeria (Guus Hak)

double counts. The total number of birds recorded on 1 and 8 March 2001 was about the same.

Given that (1) many sites where the species was recorded decades ago (e.g. Forcados, Anambra Creek, Badagri) were not visited by us; (2) some of our observations appear to suggest that sandy shores at estuaries may be a favoured habitat (see records of 8 March 2002, Dodo River estuary) not previously realised; and (3) that the number of birds present at those sites that were surveyed could be higher than noted here, we estimate that we did not record more than 10% of the population. If correct, the total Anambra Waxbill population would number at least 500 birds.

As the species relies mainly on weeds of more or less disturbed habitats and does not appear to be intolerant of human presence, food availability should not be drastically reduced in case of anthropic disturbance. We therefore presume that the planned dredging of the Niger River will not be detrimental to the species. However, without precise data on its breeding biology, we are unable to evaluate the impact of human activities on the small population of the Anambra Waxbill.

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